

Indenture of Grace Wisher

Grace Wisher to Mary Pickersgill

This Indenture Witnesseth that Grace Wisher a free Girl of Colour, hath put herself and by and with the consent and approbation of her mother Jenny Wisher doth voluntarily and of her own free will and accord put herself to Mrs. Mary Pickersgill to learn the art and mystery of Housework and plain sewing, and after the manner of an apprentice to serve the said Mary Pickersgill from the day of the date hereof and during and to the full end and Term of Six years next ensuing. During all which Term the said apprentice her said Mistress faithfully shall serve, her secrets keep, her lawful commands every at all times readily obey, she shall do no Damage to her said Mistress nor see or suffer it to be done by others without giving notice thereof to her said Mistress. She shall not waste her said Mistress Goods nor lend them unlawfully to any she shall not Contract Matrimony within the said Term, without license from her said Mistress. She shall neither buy nor sell, she shall not absent herself day nor night from her said Mistresses service without leave, but in all things behave herself as a good and faithful apprentice ought to do, during the said Term, and the said Mistress on her part shall use the utmost of her Endeavour to teach or cause to be taught or instructed the said apprentice the art of Housework and plain sewing, or needle work, and provide for her sufficient meat drink Cloathing washing & Lodging, suitable for such an apprentice during the term aforesaid, and at the Expiration of said Term Customary freedom dues and it is agreed between the said Jenny Wisher and the said Mary Pickersgill that the said Mary shall advance to the said Jenny twelve dollars at the time of executing these presents, out of which sum the said Jenny is to purchase for the apprentice Grace Wisher a dress of Baize cloth or at the end a Term of twelve months from the date hereof to pay the said Jenny Wisher a further sum of twelve Dollars deducting so much therefrom as may be necessary for the comfortable cloathing of said apprentice, particular bills or accounts whereof are to be furnished by the said Mary Pickersgill and for the true performance full and singular the covenants and agreements aforesaid, the parties bind themselves to each other firmly by these presents, in witness whereof the said parties have interchangeably set their hands and seals this Sixteenth day of December 1809.

Subscribed and acknowledged before Mary Pickersgill
Thomas Bailey, a Justice of the Peace Grace Wisner (her mark)
for Baltimore County Jenny Wisner (her mark)

Approved and ordered to be Recorded by the Orphans Court of Baltimore County this 6th day of
January 1810 Same day Recorded.

Examined by Wm. Buchanan, Reg.

Baltimore 16th of December 1809 Receive of Mrs. Mary Pickersgill the sum of twelve dollars
including the Baize Dress, being the consideration within mentioned to be paid to me in advance.

Jenny Wisner (her mark)

Test, Tho. Bailey

Comments from Stephen Whitman:

This indenture combines fairly standard legal language with some unusual features. What follows reviews the indenture, item by item, and provides context.

Jenny Wisner, a woman of color, voluntarily bound her daughter Grace, "a free girl of color" to Mary Pickersgill for a term of six years. The indenture does not mention Grace's age. Maryland's 1793 apprenticeship law stipulated sixteen as the age of majority for female apprentices, the age when an apprenticeship terminated. So Grace was perhaps aged ten when bound. If so, Grace was about the average age for girls, white or black, bound out by a parent.

The fact that Jenny bound Grace, rather than her father, was uncommon. Jenny may have been a widow, a single mother, or a woman whose husband was a slave, and thus unable to participate legally in indenting a child. Neither the census records nor the tax records c. 1810-1820 show a Jenny Wisner; she does not appear in the city directories. Nor did Jenny Wisner bind out any other children in the period 1805-1820. If we wish to speculate, it might be the case that Grace was Jenny's eldest child, someone whose binding would generate cash to maintain younger siblings, and who would no longer require maintenance herself. It may be significant that the binding took place in

December: Baltimore's economy slowed down in the winter, and Jenny may have been eager, or desperate, to find a place for her daughter before the lean months ahead.

It bears stating that Grace's being bound by her mother, rather than at the behest of a court, was a rarity for an African American child in early nineteenth-century Baltimore. Circa 1810, approximately two thousand teenaged white boys were serving as apprentices, or about one half that segment of the city's population. The proportion of black children bound out was substantially less, and only about one-sixth of them were girls. Anecdotal evidence suggests that parents feared that girls could be kidnapped and falsely sold as slaves, or subjected to sexual assault in a master's house. Jenny Wisher's willingness to bind Grace to Mary Pickersgill may reflect a greater level of trust in putting her daughter in a female-headed household.

Mary promised to teach Grace "Housework and plain sewing", to provide her with Meat, Drink, Cloathing, washing and lodging. These were standard terms and conditions. While most boys were promised craft training, about 80% of female apprentices were to be taught housework and sewing, like Grace. If we like, we can parse the phrase a bit further. Court-directed bindings of black children frequently stated that the child would be taught to be a "servant" or "waiter": possibly Jenny Wisher preferred the less subordinate word "housework." And maybe Mary Pickersgill chose the expression "plain sewing". Many girls were to learn to "spin, knit, and sew", but in Mary's urban household, dedicated to the business of cutting and sewing together flags, spinning and knitting were not the order of the day.

Mary also promised to pay "customary freedom dues" at the conclusion of Grace's indenture. In all likelihood, this meant that Mary would give Grace two suits of clothes, one of which would be new; such were the promises made to most apprentices before 1830 or so, by which time freedom dues were stipulated in amounts of cash. Again, there is nothing remarkable in this clause of the indenture.

Grace made the customary promises to be obedient, industrious, and discreet, to refrain from

trading on her own behalf, and not to marry during her indenture. A boy's indenture might also have bound him not to haunt ale houses, gamble, fornicate, or run away.

Mrs. Pickersgill did not promise any education to Grace Wisher, as she would in her indenture of Mary Martin, in 1814. This was uncommon in early nineteenth-century Baltimore: almost all white apprentices and nearly 80% of girls of color indented before 1820 received a promise of instruction in reading, or reading and writing. Both Grace and Jenny Wisher marked the indenture rather than signing it, so they did not write, but may have been able to read. By the 1820s, the apprenticeship laws would allow masters of black apprentices to omit instruction in reading and writing, in return for a cash payment to the apprentice, but such was not the case in 1810.

Mary did agree to pay Jenny Wisher twelve dollars upon the signing of the indentures, and a postscript notes that Jenny received the money. Mary made a further commitment to give Jenny Wisher another twelve dollars one year later, subject to deductions for clothes furnished by Mary to Grace. Payments of cash to (or by) the apprentice's parent are virtually never recorded in the indentures. A small percentage of indentures did make stipulations about the apprentice's clothes, e.g., waiving the master's obligation to clothe the apprentice during the first year of the indenture. In this instance, Mary and Jenny seem to have negotiated a fixed value of twelve dollars for Grace's clothing during the first year of the indenture. Perhaps Jenny intended to clothe Grace at her own expense and then receive the twelve dollars from Mary at year's end; perhaps Mary wanted to establish a ceiling for her clothing expenditures for Grace.

Questions re Grace Wisher, and the slave in M.P.'s household

What deductions can we make about the lives of the African-American servants living in Mary's household?

The 1810 census indicates that nine people were residing in Rebecca Young's household: one adult white man, six white females of varying ages, one slave, and one free person of color.

In 1810, the city of Baltimore had a population of 46,555, of whom 5,671 were free people of color (12%) and 4,672 were slaves (10%). The city's black population was midway through its early

transition from slave to free. Twenty years earlier in 1790, four-fifths of the city's then sixteen hundred African Americans had been free. Twenty years later, in 1830, only one-fifth of some eighteen thousand black people in Baltimore would be enslaved.

The slave population of the city was spread across 1681 households. Nearly half of the slaveholders in Baltimore, like Rebecca Young, had only one enslaved person in their household. A majority of the slaves (2649 out of 4672 [57%]) lived in households with four or fewer slaves, making it likely that they were separated from at least some of their immediate family, as must have been the case with the lone slave at Mrs. Young's Albermarle Street house.

Grace's presence in a slaveowning household was not the norm. Only about one tenth of the city's free people of color lived in white-headed households with slaves: the vast majority lived on their own. Slaveholders in Baltimore and throughout the South took a dim view of close contact between slaves and free people of color; the latter, in the euphemism of the day, were thought to "demoralize" slaves, i.e., cause them to wish to become free. But bringing Grace Wisner into a house with a slave did not necessarily make trouble on this score. To the extent that free black "demoralizing" of slaves amounted to aid in exiting slavery by negotiated manumission or outright escape, ten-year old Grace posed little threat.

Mary Pickersgill's "Old Town" neighborhood, which more or less corresponded to Baltimore's then seventh ward must have been a thoroughly "demoralized" zone. Within the ward, two-thirds of the black residents (1141 of 1713) were free. Possibly Jenny Wisner, Grace's mother lived, like many free black people, on an alley or side street near Albermarle.

Neighboring households on Albermarle Street also included slaves. Peter Clopper, a sailmaker who lived at 58 Albermarle, hired a thirteen year old female slave from William Atkinson, according to the 1813 tax list for the city. A number of French people lived on the street, probably refugees who had left St. Domingue, or Haiti, after the slaves' revolution there. A few of them owned

slaves: Dr. Hubert, Mme. Mousinier, and Mme. Clery, the latter possessed of two men, four women, and five children who resided with her. Perhaps the African Americans at the Young/Pickersgill house learned a few French words or phrases in street conversation.

Q: How did the presence of African American servants affect the daily lives of residents in the household?

We can begin by asking what kind of work Grace and the female slave performed. Water for drinking, washing, and cooking had to be fetched to the house, and carried about within. When one of Baltimore's earliest water companies began promoting itself a few years later, its advertisements claimed that having water piped into one's house would pay for itself by reducing the need for at least one servant. An exaggerated claim, probably, but we get a hint that carrying water was a significant task.

Fires had to be built and tended, and ashes cleaned and disposed of. There was food preparation, serving, and cleaning for nine people, as well as laundering and ironing, and the daily round of disposing of human wastes. Plenty of work to occupy a woman and a girl, whether or not either of them helped out in the flagmaking business.

Other daily household tasks included going to market to buy food, firewood, and household supplies, the making and mending of clothing, curtains, and bed linens, and sweeping and cleaning.

With two female houseworkers present, the other women and girls could perhaps concentrate their efforts on flagmaking, and only secondarily be obliged to turn to housekeeping.

QUERY for Flag House people: What do we know from documents, objects, etc. about the extent to which the Young/Pickersgill household did its own food processing? Were there fruit trees on the

property or a vegetable garden? Were they making jellies, pickling vegetables, etc.? Did they keep any animals, and if so, did they salt, pickle, or corn meat, make sausage? Could Grace Wisher have been expected to tend chickens, or milk a cow, or look after a pig? (Such activities were on their way to becoming uncommon in Baltimore, but had by no means disappeared in 1810. The city was still passing ordinances against pigs roaming at large, for example.)

*** What deductions can we make about Mary Pickersgill's business from the presence of African American servants in her household?

This is a complex issue. We can begin by saying that hundreds of Baltimoreans who worked in the crafts and manufacturing owned slaves, and that many of these slaves worked with and for their owners in their businesses. Craftsmen who operated on a large scale and who produced goods for markets with steady and high demand were most likely to make the long term investment in labor that slaveowning entailed. Brickmakers, nailmakers, and operators of tobacco factories often owned and hired slaves who worked in their shops. Specialized artisans with smaller scale operations, like watchmakers or coachmakers, tended not to employ slave workers, relying instead on apprentices. Mary Pickersgill's flagmaking enterprise almost certainly fell into the latter category.

The early 1800s were an age of naval wars, privateering, and the Embargo and Non-Intercourse Acts. A flagmaking business whose fortunes were tied to the market swings of the shipping trades must have had its slow periods. This would not be a good situation for the profitable employment of slave labor: there would be too many times when the worker would not be generating a return on the investment of his or her purchase price. By contrast, an apprentice, who cost next to nothing other than her maintenance, could be a useful adjunct in the house. In slack times, the apprentice could do "housework"; in moments of peak demand, she could be pressed into service

doing "plain sewing."

So Grace Wisher (and the enslaved woman in the household) probably spent most days peeling vegetables, washing chamberpots, and scrubbing laundry. But when Mary took on the task of making the Star Spangled Banner, the African American women may well have sewed on a star, or stitched two stripes together.